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Laurie Baker: A Tribute

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Laurie Baker, an Indian architect of British origin, passed away last Sunday at the age of ninety at home in Thiruvananthapuram. The conscience keeper of Indian architecture, and a widely admired (but imperfectly appreciated) icon of alternative practices of modernity in Indian life, also had a great sense of humour. Was the departure on April 1- that had us scrambling for confirmation after the first sms- his little parting joke then?

For over four decades, Baker has been known for his pioneering practice of cost-effective architecture in Kerala. Famous as the builder of affordable homes for the poor, Baker was (is it already 'was'?) also a unique creative artist whose originality, technical control and a unique sense of whimsy made low cost yield high architectural quality for everyone. His greatest contribution was showing that cost-effective and ecologically sustainable construction does not automatically imply shoddy building and reduced creative freedom. Baker showed, in fact, that sustainable technologies when adopted with care and creativity, could lead to a unique architectural expression, one that moved the expert and the layman alike.

Born into a Quaker family in Birmingham in 1917, Laurence W. Baker trained as an architect in the same city, and traveled to China as a volunteer in the ambulance service during World War II. On the way back to England in 1945, he passed through India. A chance encounter with Mahatma Gandhi in Mumbai, while staying with Quaker friends waiting for his steamer home, convinced him that his expertise was needed in India. He returned to India within a few months, where he met Elizabeth Jacob, a doctor, whom he married in 1948. For the next fifteen years they lived in a remote village in the hills of Pithoragarh in Uttar Pradesh and ran a hospital. It was only after the couple returned to Elizabeth's home state Kerala, and specifically to Thiruvananthapuram in the late sixties, that Baker began a full-fledged practice as an architect who also built his own projects. His reputation, thus, is built entirely upon work that he did after his fiftieth birthday!

Baker's life and practice were often marked by strategic inversions of conventions in the pursuit of foundational ideals. His method of practice was the very opposite of the statutory model in India which followed the British system. Thus, while Indian architects around him followed the British way of designing and directing operations from their drawing boards as 'consultants' far removed from the bustle of the site, Baker organized his work as a designer-builder in the manner of the traditional Indian master craftsman. He never maintained a regular office or a battalion of assistants, often sketched on waste paper, and designed largely on site. Unlike most practicing architects, he knew the trades well enough to train his workers himself and be open enough to learn from them at the same time. Every project was thus design-built with teams of craftsmen he had himself trained. This hands-on approach made it possible for him to pursue cost-effectiveness in design, otherwise impossible in the normal professional mode.

Baker's work is characterized by a fairly consistent system of design principles, building methods, and equally consistent but evolving set of idiosyncrasies. Baker always treated factors like climate, the peculiarities of site, and the high consumption of scarce energy and capital in construction as basic components of the matrix of 'givens' that defined the solution space of every project. The functional and habitational demands of individuals or organizations who dwelt in his spaces governed the specific configuration and character of each project. And yet, these 'external' factors to which he paid close attention, never appeared to constrain his instinct for producing sensuous, dramatic and engaging spaces that had a great 'fit' with the lives led in them. A large number of buildings he designed – an astounding two thousand of them by one account- including iconic houses like those for Abu Abraham, T.C. Alexander, Nalini Nayak and K.N. Raj, testify to this fact. Gautam Bhatia, the New Delhi based architect and writer, who wrote probably the first book on Baker in 1991, recalls being amazed when he had gone to stay with friends in Kerala who lived in a Baker house. 'Every detail in the house was innovative and freshly thought of right down to the W.C. in the middle of the toilet, with the basin behind it, the kind of thing heritage hotels do today. It was almost an instantaneous decision for me to explore the work of this man further, which then led to the book', he says. The Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Thiruvananthapuram, the project that secured Baker's reputation in the 1970s, is built using his innovative system of cavity walls in un-plastered brick, reinforced concrete 'filler slabs' (where recycled clay tiles replaced a fair bit of the concrete), and brick *jalis* (patterns of perforation) instead of expensive windows. The buildings are sited carefully and laid out at different levels on a sloping site to minimize excavation and earth filling. As elsewhere, Baker keeps out the rain, lets in the breeze and modulates daylight by controlling openings, introducing *jalis*, providing roof overhangs, and wrapping internal spaces around intimate courtyards. These same functional devices also form the unique visual identity of his buildings. In this early project, Baker's capacity to combine social consciousness and expressive freedom in a witty and vivid manner is already clearly evident.

Baker's must also rank among the 'freest' of architectural imaginations in contemporary Indian architecture. His India Coffee House, a small building for an inexpensive restaurant outside the main bus stand at Thiruvananthapuram, shows how free he was from pre-conceived ideas as well as from any fear of the apparent strangeness of his own solutions. Here the dining area is a curving ramp that rises about two floors and winds tightly about a functional service core housing the pantry and stores. Built-in seats and tables hug the curving outer *jali* wall, whose perforations throw a playful pattern of light on the spiraling floor while lending a tapestry-like feel to the wall when viewed from outside.

It was in one of the last houses that he built in his usual hands-on manner, however, that I came to appreciate to the fullest, the sheer poetry, quirkiness and humanity of his architectural imagination. The house for Suresh and Neerada is built around a mango shaped open courtyard. A continuous filler slab roof spirals up from the lowest level to the highest in a continuous sweep. There is not a single straight line in the plan. The living room has a little window seat with a rare luxury - an almost traditional wooden

window seat with a trellis. The living space curves deeper into the house and the glowing darkness at the other end is leavened by a dramatically lit nook to one side. And at the centre of it all, the long rising, curving wall has what looks like a large scatter of stained glass, but is actually a multi-coloured pattern of recycled bottles built into the brickwork. The experiential richness of that space has not dimmed in my memory for seven years.

That experiential richness is one connection Baker's architecture has often shared with the traditional architecture of Kerala that he learnt so much from, but from which his work differs so much. Baker has often been described in the popular media as an upholder of local craft traditions. Actually, though, he was neither a traditionalist nor a modernist in the usual narrow sense of either term. His keenness to learn from the wisdom of traditional building systems of a place always matched his very modern thrust towards economy and structural efficiency. He was more modern than many avowed modernists in the honesty and austerity of material means, even as he achieved exuberance in expression. He departed from the nostrums of tradition in the freedom and expressiveness of his forms and ornament. Visually, his use of exposed brick construction can be considered a big break with architectural tradition in Kerala. And yet his work fits into the landscape with an ease that belies the 'strangeness' of the aesthetic he brought into it.

It is a commentary on our understanding of what it means to be modern, that Baker's approach has often been thought of as only an 'alternative' to modern architecture. That may simply mirror the fact that we view the Nehruvian direction of modernization as the only possible one. In reality, the sheer intelligence, social aptness, and technical, aesthetic and constructional innovativeness of Baker's work contrasts starkly with the standardized processes of producing waste and alienation followed by the mainstream. If we accept that among the core values of a desirable modernity are optimization, equity, and scalability, Baker's work appears more modern than that of most modernists. This parallels the manner in which, from the point of view of sustainability, Gandhi's vision of progress appears closer to a more convincing project for Indian modernity than Nehru's. Even if it is a true uniqueness of aesthetic vision we seek, Baker's work offers a look and feel that is strikingly personal and yet very habitable for the people he built for. At the very least then, Baker illuminated the difference between being a modern and a *modernist* architect.

Baker consistently refused to have assistants. He was also, as Bhatia says, 'someone with no aspect of standardization in his personality'. And yet, a fairly vibrant tradition of building upon and with his ideas has taken root in Kerala and elsewhere, through the work of various architects and agencies like Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development (COSTFORD) set up specifically to disseminate his approach through building practice. Speaking about the future of Baker's legacy, Sajan PB, Joint Director, COSTFORD, who worked closely with Baker for over a decade, says that Baker was a master, and 'no single person can take his place'. He, however, reveals that a number of like-minded people are planning to start a school of architecture in Kerala to teach Baker's philosophy and practice of architecture.

A large number of architects outside Kerala have been inspired by his vision, and buildings in places as far away as Goa, Pondicherry, and New Delhi show evidence of his influence. Today, the construction industry in India is booming and the explosion of new choices threatens to overcome the sense and sensibility of experts and consumers. What better time then to pay close heed again to the architect who showed, really showed, that less is much-much more than one can ever imagine?